New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1950

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**Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of October 16, 1950*

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NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK POST HOME NEWS
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"Call Me Madam"

The New York Times

October 13, 1950

Ethel Merman as an American Envoy in 'Call Me Madam,' With Berlin's Music

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Despite the preliminary ballyhoo, it is easy to enjoy "Call Me Madam," which opened with considerable éclat at the Imperial last evening. For the bookmakers and the tune-smithy have put together a good-hearted show with a very happy manner. And Ethel Merman is in it.

As you may have heard, she is cast as the American Ambassador to Lichtenburg, which, as the impish program declares, is one of the two mythical countries—the other being the United States of America. Our Ethel has taken a crack at a number of parts in the last giddy years, but this is the first time she has represented our Government abroad.

* * *

Don't expect her to be awed, in spite of the luxurious Mainhocher garments. She is still lighting up like an inspired pin-ball machine, and still blowing the music lustily throughout the theatre. Some of the personages of Lichtenburg are shocked by her vulgarity. But, as in the case of the authors of the show, everyone can see that Ethel's heart is in the right place and that there is a streak of modesty under that drum-major's personality when a European has the audacity to reprove her. We were all eating out of Ethel's hand last evening, for she was acting in the grand manner without being snobbish or pretentious.

Let's not pretend that the book is immortal. Howard Lindsay and Russel Crouse have left some dull spots in it and a few jokes that are heavy-handed. But they have had the grace to tell an ingratiating yarn about an exuberant American hostess who goes abroad full of Yankee self-confidence and learns, with a bit of a shock, that Europeans have to be respected. Among the most engaging items is a bookish Harvard graduate student, with a headful of facts and statistics, who very expeditiously falls in love with a Lichtenburg princess. Since the book constitutes a musical comedy plot, an experienced theatregoer must not admit that, in addition to being amusing, it is now and then genuinely touching.

* * *

That is where Irving Berlin comes in. This is one of his most enchanting scores, fresh, light and beguiling; and fitted to lyrics that fall out of it with grace and humor. "The Hostess With the Mostest on the Ball" turns out to be a fairly monotonous number. But "Lichtenburg" is a poignant song with a mature sense of deference toward modest people. And "It's a Lovely Day Today" is one of the most rapturous romantic songs on Mr. Berlin's music-rack.

For Miss Merman he has written some jubilee ballads that have volume and authority—"The Best Thing for You Would Be Me," "Can You Use Any Money Today?" and "Washington Square Dance" being the most ringing examples. Since General Eisenhower was in the audience last night, Mr. Berlin opened the 1952 elections with a jaunty campaign song, bluntly dubbed "They Like Ike." In general, Mr. Berlin is not afraid of rhythm and melody; and Don Walker has done him the favor of arranging some appreciative orchestrations.

It is impossible to pay the proper respects to all the things that contribute to the pleasures of a bountiful show: Raoul Pène du Bois' carnival costumes and cheerful sets; Jerome Robbins' festive ballets; the sweet-potato arias of Ollie Engebretson and Richard Fjellman; and, of course, George Abbott's jaunty direction.

* * *

But it would be unforgivable not to express appreciation for the taste and warmth of the acting of Paul Lukas as a Lichtenburg statesman. Galina Talva is particularly attractive as a timid princess with a mind of her own. And Russell Nype made a host of friends last evening by acting with modesty and sincerity. As a timid grind fresh out of college he does not look very promising in the early scenes. But eventually it turns out that Mr. Nype can also sing. When Miss Merman and he sing "You're Just in Love," which is Mr. Berlin's top achievement for the evening, "Call Me Madam" throws a little stardust around the theatre and sets the audience to roaring.

Quite an evening on the whole.

"CALL ME MADAM"

Musical comedy with book by Howard Lindsay and Russel Crouse; music and lyrics by Irving Berlin; staged by George Abbott; dances and musical numbers staged by Jerome Robbins; settings and costumes by Raoul Pene Du Bois; Ethel Merman's dresses by Mainbocher; musical direction by Jay Blackston; orchestrations by Don Walker; presented by Leland Hayward at the Imperial Theatre, October 12, 1950. The cast:

Mrs. Sally Adams.. Ethel Merman
The Secretary of State..... Geoffrey Lumb
Supreme Court Justice..... Owen Coll
Congressman Wilkins..... Pat Harrington
Henry Gibson.... William David
Kenneth Gibson.... Russell Nype
Senator Gallagher..... Ralph Chambers
Secretary to Mrs. Adams... Jeanne Bal
Butler..... William Hall
Senator Brockbank.... Jay Velie
Cosmo Constantine.. Paul Lukas
Pemberton Maxwell.. Alan Hewitt
Clerk..... Stowe Phelps
Hugo Tantinnin..... E. A. Krumschmidt
Sebastian Sebastian..... Henry Lascoe
Princess Maria... Galina Talva
Court Chamberlain..... William David
A Maid..... Lily Paget
Grand Duchess Sophie..... Lilia Skala
Grand Duke Otto..... Owen Coll

Synopsis: The play is laid in two mythical countries. One is called Lichtenburg, the other the United States of America. Act I. 1. Office of the Secretary of State. 2. Sally's living-room in Washington. 3. Public Square in Lichtenburg. 4. Reception Room in the American Embassy. 5. Public Square in Lichtenburg. 6. The Lichtenburg Fair. 7. A Corridor in the Palace. 8. Sally's sitting-room in the Embassy. Act II. 1. Public Square. 2. Embassy Garden. 3. Public Square. 4. Sally's sitting-room. 5. Sally's living-room in Wash.

Daily Mirror

October 13, 1950

Merman Makes 'Madam' A Real Smash Hit

By ROBERT COLEMAN

Thanks to the incomparable Ethel Merman, they'll be calling "Call Me Madam" a smash hit. What Joe DiMaggio is in the clutch for the Yankees, so La Merman is when the chips are down for the new arrival at the Imperial Theatre. Leland Hayward had a lucky day when he signed her to spark his newest click.

Hayward is a showman who buys the best. In this instance, he's bought a score by Irving Berlin, a book by Howard Lindsay and Russel Crouse, direction by George Abbott, choreography by Jerome Robbins, scenery and costumes by Raoul Pene Du Bois, and haute couture for the star by Mainbocher.

The tunes by Berlin are catchy, the Lindsay and Crouse gags are topical and quite amusing when at their best, the dances by Robbins are sprightly, the staging by Abbott swiftly paced and the Du Bois decor very handsome indeed. All are useful assets, useful for a superlative comedienne named Merman.

It is the terrific Ethel who has to hit the homers after her associates have walked or singled. And she never lets the team down. As a rich and uninhibited Washington hostess, as a red-tape-cutting Ambassador to a country so small it almost eludes Rand & McNally, or as a telephone pal of "Harry's"—she is nothing less than magnificent.

Tripping over her train, topping a political wisecrack, getting chummy with royalty, pulling the stuffing out of stuffed shirts, Miss Merman is hilarious. And she goes to town with those Berlin songs!

Paul Lukas is suave and likable as a Lichtenburg diplomat. Alan Hewitt, Pat Harrington, Jay Velie, Ralph Chambers, Geoffrey Lumb and Calina Talva are good in other roles, but it is young Russell Nype, as a serious-minded, amateur diplomat, who takes second honors of the evening. Paired with the star, Nype stops the show with "You're Just in Love."

Other Berlin numbers that fall pleasantly on the ear are "The Hostess with the Mostes' on the Ball," "Washington Square Dance," "Can You Use Any Money Today?" and "It's a Lovely Day Today." There is also a snappy campaign ditty called "They Like Ike." Among those who enjoyed Harrington's rollicking rendition of it was none other than General Eisenhower himself.

"Call Me Madam" opened to an historic advance sale of close to a $1,000,000 at a $7.20 top. By curtain time, would - be first-nighters were offering as high as $400 a pair for any seats in the house, with no sellers reported. Those lucky enough to own ducats hung on to them. The Imperial was jammed with celebrities, who fought their way through mobs of autograph hunters packed along W. 45th St. It was by all odds the most brilliant premiere of the season.

The ermine wrap and white-tie set embraced "Call Me Madam" affectionately, and gave Miss Merman a richly deserved ovation. What a trouper! As Walter Winchell put it: "They ought to call it 'Call Me Merman'!"

Journal American
October 13, 1950

Ethel Merman's Big, Good-Natured Show

By ROBERT GARLAND

Yes! . . .

This "Call Me Madam" is Ethel Merman's. It is Miss Merman's show from start to finish. It is her show when she is on the stage. It is her show when she if off. It is her show when Paul Lukas is being charming. It is her show when Russell Nype is being good.

Irving Berlin wrote the music and the lyrics. They are excellent. Howard Lindsay and Russel Crouse wrote the book. It serves well. Dances and musical numbers are by Jerome Robbins. Scenery and costumes are by Raoul Pene Du Bois. Miss Merman's dresses are by Mainbocher.

But, as I have said, "Call Me Madam" is Ethel Merman's. And this is how I like it! It would not have suited her thirty, twenty, even ten years ago. But it suits her now. It suits her as if it were made for her. Which, of course, it is. Everything about it.

Even Alan Hewfit, who is featured. And Galina Talva, who ought to be. And Jay Blackton, who conducts the orchestra. And the orchestra. And the orchestrations by Don Walker. And the additional orchestrations by Joe Glover. And the dance music arrangements by——

These and all the rest are Ethel Merman's. They should be. Miss Merman has worked her way to them. She has earned them. Just as she earned "Annie Get Your Gun." But someone else has done the sharpshooter from Ohio. But Mrs. Sally Adams from Oklahoma. Never!

• • •

Nype Scores

Mrs. Sally Adams—"neither the character of Mrs. Sally Adams, nor Miss Ethel Merman, resembles any person alive or dead," says my program—is ambassador to Lichtenburg. She is being appointed when the curtain rises. She is being unappointed when the curtain falls.

In between are the Public Square in Lichtenburg, the Reception Room in the American Embassy, the Lichtenburg Fair, a Corridor in the Palace, the Sitting-Room in the Embassy, the Embassy Garden and, after Lichtenburg again, Washington, D. C. And President Truman.

As I have no need to tell you, the ambassador from America is always busy. When she is not singing (and she is singing a good deal of the time) she is wooing Paul Lukas. And when she is not wooing Mr. Lukas she is fixing it up for Russell Nype and Galina Talva.

Mr. Nype, as I have told you, is good. And, at the Imperial, he is addicted to Miss Talva. She is the Princess Maria of Lichtenburg. They constitute the youthful love interest. But it is when he combines his voice with Ethel Merman's that he scores.

I would watch Russell Nype if I were you. He was in Cheryl Crawford's "Regina" last year. And he was good. Miss Merman gives him the opportunity to be better in "Call Me Madam." More popular, that is, for him. And mighty good for her.

• • •

Songs Varied

The piece is "laid in two mystical countries," the program goes on to say. Lichtenburg and the U. S. A. Each is handsome to look at, as Raoul Pene Du Bois is my witness. Each is filled with nice looking natives, as Jerome Robbins makes sure.

Yet it is Ethel Merman—either in the costume of her native land or the country of her adoption and both from Mainbocher here in New York—who carries off the show. She knows what it is all about. She knows why. She knows, too, how to pass it on.

Especially to the Russell Nype who makes the most of it. Next to Miss Merman, it is Mr. Nype's evening. He creeps up on you. It is not until "Once Upon a Time Today" that you are won over. Then, with "It's a Lovely Day Today" you are certain.

Miss Merman's songs are varied. And becoming. "The Hostess with the Mostes' on the Ball." "Washington Square Dance." "The Best Thing for You Would Be Me." "Something to Dance About." "You're Just in Love." "Can You Use Any Money Today?" "Marrying for Love." And——

Yes, it is a big, good-natured, handsome show belonging to Ethel Merman. You would not have it otherwise. Once in a while she lets somebody have a chance. Mostly Russell Nype. Less occasionally, Paul Lukas. But, and rightly, it is Miss Merman's . . . Yes!

DAILY NEWS
October 13, 1950

'Call Me Madam' Comes to Town With Its Plot as Its Big Handicap

By JOHN CHAPMAN

When Howard Lindsay and Russel Crouse got the notion to write a musical titled "Call Me Madam" in which Ethel Merman would play a lusty ambassador from the U. S. to a European country, they hit upon a natural—for the ebullient Miss Merman could be depended upon to overwhelm any known crowned heads or statesmen. When Irving Berlin agreed to write the score the show was "in," and the public, checkbook in hand, subscribed to it with an enthusiasm rarely paralleled since the South Sea and Mississippi speculations.

My own high hopes were not exactly dashed last evening when "Call Me Madam" had its first performance at the Imperial, but they were quite severely dampened. It seemed to me that the authors, instead of letting well enough alone—which would be to turn Miss Merman loose in Europe and let her fight her way out—got bogged down in a useless plot involving a mythical kingdom, peasant dances, a beautiful princess and other folderol, and then tried to spruce it up with some bright comment about U. S. politics.

Berlin's Songs Fine.

I found the result to be a curious combination of "State of the Union," "A Texas Steer" and "The Red Mill." I was happiest when Mr. Berlin, the musician, was in charge. "It's a Lovely Day Today," sung by Russell Nype and Galina Talva, is one of those oh-so-simple Berlin ballads which he does so well—a lovely sentimental song. "You're Just in Love" is a fascinating duet for Miss Merman and Mr. Nype, in which she sings a number with the typical Merman zing and he does a slow, mooning affair which seems completely unrelated—yet they dovetail perfectly.

Mr. Berlin has some comedy numbers, including one for Miss Merman called "Money, Money, Money," which are good, and some others, like a political discussion titled "They Like Ike," which are not so.

Humor Is Lacking.

Lindsay and Crouse, who deny in the program that they ever heard of Perle Mesta, have appointed party-giving Ethel Merman ambassador to the mythical domain of Lichtenberg. Her manners are not the best but her heart is generous, and her first party abroad is no less than a national festival. She falls in love with Paul Lukas, who is the suave Continental type, having a mustache but no voice. And a young assistant in her embassy, Mr. Nype, falls in love with the princess who will inherit the Duchy, Miss Talva. He and I will have to fight it out some day, I suppose, for I fell in love with the young lady, too. She is something new and charming as a musical comedy ingenue.

So far as I am concerned, the authors of the bright, sharp "State of the Union" have fallen down pretty badly in the humor department. Their jokes about Senators and foreign loans are not uproarious, and last evening I got a little tired of Miss Merman answering the phone, saying "Hello, Harry" and asking how Margaret did in her last concert. Chic Johnson takes care of Margaret quicker in "Pardon Our French" by shooting her right off the bat . . . and even that is not a good joke.

Leland Hayward's production has smart, bright scenery by Raoul Pene du Bois, smart, bright costumes by the same man, and smart, bright dances by Jerome Robbins. Miss Merman is her old great self, singing like a boat whistle and leering like a female Valentino, except when that confounded Graustarkian plot slows her down. George Abbott directed.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

October 13, 1950

= By HOWARD BARNES =

Her Excellent Excellency!

ADVANCE interest in a musical show known as "Call Me Madam" proved amply justified at the Imperial last evening. With Ethel Merman taking over the starring role of a feminine ambassador to a mythical duchy in the grand style of musical comedy, there is cause for rejoicing in the theater again. A satirical libretto by Howard Lindsay and Russel Crouse is not in the top brackets of operetta invention, but the Irving Berlin songs and a superb production make "Call Me Madam" the gala event that it promised to be. The George Abbott direction, fancy costumes by Raoul Pene du Bois and Mainbocher and gay choreography by Jerome Robbins add to the gusto of a fetching, old-fashioned musical jamboree.

* * *

Miss Merman is the chief instigator of merriment in a work which has already insured itself a healthy run at the box-office. Making no determined effort to impersonate a party-giving ambassador to a country which might just as well have been called Luxembourg, she keeps the proceedings captivating at all times. On more than one occasion, she plays second fiddle to her colleagues in "Call Me Madam," particularly in the delightful Berlin song, "It's A Lovely Day Today," but that is the surest gauge of her artistry. Her Mrs. Sally Adams vitalizes a so-so plot unfailingly. It is in no sense her greatest role, but she gives it a brilliant interpretation.

* * *

With all the hullabaloo which has attended the musical's advent, it was no easy task for an actress to achieve the triumph which she has done. For much of the time she is involved in such fandangoes as lending some millions to Lichtenburg, or surveying the foibles of another mythical country, the United States of America. In either instance she captures the spirit of a bouncing musical satire. Without her "Call Me Madam" might very well have seemed trivial and contrived. Miss Merman has a way of setting off the cavortings of song and dance nonsense with distinction.

* * *

There is no lack of agile performing in the concoction. Paul Lukas is on hand as a prime minister of the duchy who is singularly lacking in venality. Alan Hewitt is excellent in the part of a state department career man and Galina Talva scampers through secret passageways with pleasant effect. The big Berlin song, as you probably have heard, is "The Hostess With the Mostes's on the Ball," but "It's a Lovely Day" is far better. Music and comedy are blended splendidly in "Call Me Madam." It is a show which excuses its excessive advertising.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

October 13, 1950

'Call Me Madam' Is a Winner ...and It's Here to Stay

Ethel Packs New Brand Of Portfolio

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Type—Really comical musical.
Topic—Lady diplomat at work.
Star—Merman in fabulous form.
Score—Real enCHANTment.
Appears—Lovely to look at.
I think—First rate and durable.

To the quarter of a million people who have already paid for their seats to "Call Me Madam": Relax! You did a good thing. It's a winner.

With the nervous excitement and glitter in the Imperial last night, you could have sent a rocket to the moon. It just had to be tops.

The curtain went up, some gentlemen parted company, and there was Ethel Merman. She opened her mouth, and the reassurance in the house was as tangible as the joy of a kid getting a promised pony.

Nobody since Alexander the Great has had quite the confidence of Merman. You know she's going to deliver.

No Resemblance.

Slimmed down, and singing like an angel's horn, Ethel is here an ambassadress to a mythical country called Lichtenburg. As the program says, neither the character nor the star resembles any other person, alive or dead. Forget about Mrs. Mesta in Luxembourg and face the fact that Ethel is unique.

Merman in a duchy, and also in a constant battle with protocol, means elegant humor. She brushes aside the rules like cobwebs, wins everybody's heart, and a lot of make-believe trouble for herself.

Sweet for keeps on a dapper politician, who wants his country to help itself, Ethel offends him by arranging a loan from the U.S. Their disputes take the unshattering form of a married couple's differences. You can't take them seriously, but neither can you help being delighted when everything comes out all right.

With Merman, an Irving Berlin score and George Abbott to direct a Howard Lindsay-Russell Crouse book, the show had to be sharp and funny. But it came as a surprise that it should be extravagantly lovely to watch, and should prove warm and charmingly romantic.

'Hello, Harry.'

We are just about the only people in the world nowadays who can be sent rolling in the aisles at jokes about our own major foreign policies and the supreme officer of our government. The authors sock their wisecracks home, but there is not a mean or a snide word in the entire evening.

Maybe you think talking to "Harry" about "Margaret" on the phone is familiar stuff for gags, but then you've never heard Merman do it. Her joy and her concern with her friends' affairs are monumental.

She marches around in what looks like a one-girl fashion show, filling sweaters, presentation gowns and negligees with smart contours, and plastered with diamonds like flame throwers.

She sings most of the songs, and as you know, when she does, they stay sung. She stopped the show cold with "Can You Use Any Money Today?" and even colder with "You're Just In Love," a syncopated duet with Russell Nype.

People's Choice.

I want to be the last to suggest doing without Ethel Merman, but the show distinctly suggests that she could do more good on a foreign beat than any 20 of our usual diplomats. Let's keep her here, and make this show compulsory training for the consular service.

Irving Berlin has officially nominated Eisenhower for the Presidency in a song called "They Like Ike" which draws so much applause you can hardly hear the lyrics. My bet goes on "Marrying for Love" and "It's a Lovely Day Today" for the pop hits, and "You're Just In Love" for the number in the score most often to be sung by professionals. It's a great little collection of songs.

Paul Lukas is suavely charming as Ethel's beau, singing gracefully in an untrained, agreeable voice, and looking pleasantly amazed by just about everything. Russell Nype more than bears out the promise he showed in "Regina," as a scholarly, armorous young assistant to Ethel, and Galina Talva is a dainty Princess for him to fall in love with.

More Bow-Earners.

Bows are due so many people here, to Jerome Robbins for the fresh young dances, and Raoul Pene Du Bois for the lovely soft colors of the sets and costumes.

There hasn't been a show in this mood since "Of Thee I Sing." It is trickier nowadays to kid the government tastefully, but this is much more pointed satire than that revered hit. Lindsay and Crouse have done a grand job.

New York Post
HOME NEWS
October 13, 1950

Miss Merman, the Lady Ambassador

By Richard Watts Jr.

Compared to the advance furore greeting "Call Me Madam," which had its stylish opening at the Imperial last night, "South Pacific" virtually crept into town as a top secret. The new musical comedy, it should be reported immediately, isn't as completely deserving of the frenzy of anticipation as the Rodgers and Hammerstein masterpiece turned out to be, but it is a good show, nevertheless, and, thanks to the contributions of Ethel Merman, Irving Berlin, Lindsay and Crouse, and other illustrious talents, it richly deserves to be Broadway's latest hit. What else could it be with Miss Merman?

I am no doubt wasting your time and mine in reminding you that "Call Me Madam" is the musical show based, according to rumors that have not been too persuasively denied, on the slightly fabulous career of Mrs. Perle Mesta, the Washington hostess, who became the American Minister to the Duchy of Luxembourg. In the hope of fooling nobody, the heroine is now one Mrs. Sally Adams, and President Truman—who has become the drama season's most insistent offstage telephone voice — appoints her Ambassador to the Duchy of Lichtenburg. Of course, her kind heart overwhelms all opposition.

First, the Star

Obviously the first news in all Ethel Merman vehicles is Ethel Merman, and, as always, the report must be that she is wonderful. She hasn't as good a show or as delightful a score as "Annie Get Your Gun" provided for her, but she has a number of characteristic songs, and she does them incomparably. There is something about that volume of sound, in which you don't miss a syllable of the lyrics, that is indescribably soul-satisfying. In addition, she is a comedienne of rare skill, who combines richness and warmth with her humor. Miss Merman, the illustrious American institution, is one of the joys of the world.

Naturally, "Call Me Madam" is pretty much her show, but there are some attractive performances in the supporting roles. Paul Lukas, who gave one of the memorable characterizations of my lifetime of playgoing in "Watch on the Rhine," may not be completely at ease in musical comedy, but he plays an understanding Lichtenburg statesman with grace and charm. Russell Nype, who made a fine impression as the disagreeable son in the underrated "Regina," sings charmingly and plays with notable credibility as an earnest young man from the State Department. Alan Hewitt, always a persuasive actor, is excellent as a diplomat with a relish for red tape, and Galina Talva is attractive as a princess.

The Berlin Score

Mr. Berlin's score is not one of his most distinguished works, but it is considerably better than the one he composed for "Miss Liberty," and it is always pleasant to listen to. Of course, all of Miss Merman's numbers sound surprisingly like musical triumphs, and, in addition, there is a good love song called "It's a Lovely Day Today" and a political number known as "They Like Ike," which is gay and engaging. "They Like Ike" is considerably helped by the way in which it is sung by Pat Harrington, always a valuable man to have around a show, and you don't have to be an Eisenhower supporter to applaud it.

Howard Lindsay and Russel Crouse have provided a book that is lively and serviceable, if not brilliant. It is perhaps a trifle emphatically based on the idea that you can tell a European is all right if he doesn't want to borrow American money, and I am a little tired of the act in which a stage character talks on the phone to "Harry," with a reference to "Margaret" and the music critics for a second laugh, and greetings to "Bess" for the third titter, but my objections are not vigorous. The sets by Raoul Pene Du Bois are attractive. "Call Me Madam" and Miss Merman make a happy pair.

New York
Theatre Critics' Reviews
OFFERS

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"Legend of Sarah"

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

October 12, 1950

'Legend of Sarah' Light-Hearted Play

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Type—Light weight comedy.
Topic—Ancestor worship.
Mood—Carefree.
Cast—Most likable.

"Legend of Sarah" is a light joking work about a modern miss who considers her Revolutionary ancestors sacred.

The historical Sarah Pinney has come down in legend as a heroine who refused to budge in the face of execution, and delayed Gen. Howe's armies from chasing Washington.

Her descendent, Minerva, has interested a fabulously wealthy foundation in restoring Sarah's home town. It will be another Williamsburg and all the townspeople will profit through the sale of their homes.

There's a Catch.

The project takes up the slack in Minerva's life, after she has walked out on her best beau, and her enthusiasm knows no bounds.

The catch comes when one unwilling neighbor burns his house down. Then Minerva's mother produces hidden evidence that the famous ancestor was a startlingly immoral character. It is up to Minerva to save her own face and the fate of the town. This she manages by borrowing a trick from the false Sarah.

This is performed in a mood of pleasantry by an extremely agreeable cast. It is played for lightheartedness rather than for quips or wisecracks.

Griffies Fine.

Ethel Griffies has in the past few seasons become New York's favorite character comedienne. She has an extraordinary gift for making ordinary lines sound outrageously funny. Here she plays Minerva's mother, a key role, without ever making the slightest effort to monopolize the show, and comes off with an understandable and believable character.

Marsha Hunt is certainly eye filling as the earnest Minerva. She is discovered by the first curtain in a pose mindful of a Petty calender, and continues to portray a crisp and modern damsel with plenty of bounce.

Tom Helmore is one of the theater's most agreeable light comics. Here he has a flip role ideal for his talents, in the author who has been willing for Minerva to support him until he had a success. He makes this Bohemian character pleasantly unprincipled from the start, but finishes as charmingly consistent.

Other Active.

As the representative of the foundation Philip Coolidge draws on his unusual ability to play obnoxious people as if they never meant to be unpleasent, and he thus keeps the play from becoming preachy. Edmond Ryan is good natured as an emergency beau kept in store by Minerva, and Judith Parrish plays a Polish maid who is talkative and impertinent.

Joseph Sweeney has only a bit as the maddened neighbor, but he acts with remarkable detail and leaves a deeply etched picture of a man who believes a home is a castle.

"LEGEND OF SARAH"

Comedy by James Gow and Arnaud d'Usseau; staged by Benn W. Levy; settings by Ralph Alswang; costumes by Ben Edwards; presented by Kermit Bloomgarden at the Fulton Theatre, October 11, 1950. The cast:

Minerva Pinney...Marsha Hunt
Adam Harwick...Tom Helmore
Clementine Pinney.....
Ethel Griffies
Wanda Mankiewicz.....
Judith Parrish
P. Walter Landis.....
Philip Coolidge
Edgar Cameron...Edmon Ryan
Mr. Angus.....Joseph Sweeney

Synopsis: The Scene: A small apartment in Greenwich Village. Act I. The living room of the Pinney home in Pinneyfield. Two years later. Act II. The same. That evening. Act III. Scene 1. The same. Several hours later. Scene 2. The same. The next morning.

DAILY NEWS

October 12, 1950

'Legend of Sarah' Strives Hard To Be Amusing, but It Isn't, Very

By JOHN CHAPMAN

James Gow and Arnaud d' Usseau, serious-minded men who wrote a couple of good plays about Big Problems, and Kermit Bloomgarden, serious-minded producer of the fine "Death of a Salesman," must have got together at some time recently and said to each other, "Let us be gay." The result of this resolve, a comedy called "Legend of Sarah," was presented at the Fulton Theatre last evening. Today the gentlemen can return to their consideration of Big Problems—including one of the most important and most insoluble of all, which is how to be funny.

Not all of the saucy charm of Marsha Hunt, or the fine delivery and timing of Ethel Griffies, or the direction of such a comedy expert as Benn W. Levy, can make "Legend of Sarah" any better than a middling bore. The plot of this comedy is oddly and accidentally quite a bit like the scenario of the hapless "Southern Exposure," which I found much gayer.

Mr. d'Usseau and Mr. Gow, who wrote "Tomorrow the World" and "Deep Are the Roots," concern themselves with the projected restoration of a Colonial village by a charitable and educational foundation—like the restoration of Williamsburg by the Rockefellers. The charitable foundation, representing immense wealth, is the villain of the piece, and in the end it is foiled; the village is left to the common people who inhabit it. If "Legend of Sarah" was meant to convey a revolutionary message, it has failed, because it simply isn't funny enough.

Just a Pillow Fight.

The dominant method of the humor is to have somebody throw something at somebody else. In the beginning, Miss Hunt, who has been living in sin in Greenwich Village—an obvious redundancy—with Mr. Helmore, is mad at him and is throwing things into a suitcase, preparatory to going home to her mother, Miss Griffies. Before departing she throws things at Mr. Helmore, too.

A couple of years later Mr. Helmore comes looking for his girl in her native village. First Miss Griffies starts throwing things—books, mostly—at him. Later Miss Hunt heaves a few. Then Mr. Helmore throws some books and pillows at Miss Hunt. In the end love has its way, and I suppose the embattled young couple have gone back to living in sin in Greenwich Village.

Don't ask me about the plans to restore the Colonial hamlet, or about the ancestress of Miss Hunt who saved George Washington's forces by keeping General Howe in bed for four days, or about the mildly villainous banker, or about the poor old guy (Joseph Sweeney) who is driven out of his ancestral abode by the heartless charitable foundation. If you like, you can ask me about Miss Hunt and I will tell you she looks cute in a blue panty girdle in the first scene. A blue panty girdle is a much better foundation than the other one for a comedy, and Messrs. Gow and d'Usseau should have made more of it.

New York Post
HOME NEWS

October 12, 1950

The Secret Life of General Howe
By Richard Watts Jr.

The people who insist that the theatre is being ruined by "message" plays might find it a chastening experience to take a look at "Legend of Sarah," which opened at the Fulton last night. James Gow and Arnaud d'Usseau, its authors, have proved in the past that they have a sharp skill in the writing of dramas with a serious social purpose, and their "Tomorrow the World" and "Deep Are the Roots" were highly successful examples of that currently belabored school. Now, apparently heeding the warning against such earnest works, they have given us a comedy meant merely to entertain. The trouble is that it doesn't.

In "Legend of Sarah," the one-time crusaders come forward with a slender fable about the plight of a young lady whose most treasured ancestor was a legendary heroine of the American Revolution. Whittier, it seems, had written a poem celebrating her valiant stand against British General Howe, and a patriotic foundation is planning to turn her native village into a national shrine. The plot complications arrive when it is discovered that the old lady was a fraud. It seems that she had been sleeping with General Howe rather than fighting him.

Thin Jest

It certainly isn't my contention that the authors, having proved their talent for dramas filled with topical social comment, should continue to give us plays with an indignant editorial viewpoint if they don't want to. The only trouble is that, while they know their way around in such works, the Messrs. Gow and d'Usseau give few signs in their current offering that they have much expertness with bantering and faintly satirical comedy. "Legend of Sarah" is a thin little joke at best, and it certainly isn't brightened with notable wit.

Possibly, if a good score had been composed for the narrative and a few dance numbers had been added, the evening might have been more enlivening. I can imagine "Legend of Sarah" as a satisfactory libretto for a pleasant musical show. Since, however, it is presented as a straight play, it leaves a great deal to be desired. It is acted with zest and buoyancy by an attractive and hard-working cast, and the staging is assuredly lively enough. When all else fails, Benn W. Levy, the director, arranges for the hero and heroine to begin throwing things at each other. But it isn't even much fun when they start wrestling.

The Cast

All of this vigorous physical activity is no doubt necessary to keep the slender script of "Legend of Sarah" from disappearing into thin air. But, among other things, I am afraid that it puts an excessive burden on the actors. Marsha Hunt, who is coming to be properly recognized as one of the most captivating young actresses in the American theatre, plays the girl with the fraudulent ancestor with characteristic charm and skill, and Tom Helmore, an engaging leading man, portrays her author-sweetheart pleasantly, but their tasks are not enviable. They have to do all sorts of things, including being slightly coy.

Ethel Griffies has one of her customary roles as the mother who first discovers that old Sarah was a fraud. Not being forced to engage in pillow fights or wrestling, she has rather a happier time with her characterization. Edmon Ryan, always a good actor, is wasted as a neighbor making a racket out of the patriotic shrine, but Philip Coolidge has a few good moments as the puritanical representative of the foundation. Judith Parrish has little to do as a maid, and the ever-reliable Joseph Sweeney is confined to one scene. "Legend of Sarah" is a disappointingly minor antic.

Journal American

October 12, 1950

Disappointing, Though Cast Tries Its Best
By ROBERT GARLAND

Several worthy people try their best to make "Legend of Sarah" sound more interesting than it is. But unsuccessfully! Even Ethel Griffies fails. And Tom, as he calls himself, Helmore. Marsha Hunt, who is billed above the others, does not register.

"Legend of Sarah" is a comedy by the James Gow and Arnaud D'Usseau who wrote "Tomorrow the World" and "Deep Are the Roots." Benn Levy, author of "Clutterbuck," has come to stage it—Ralph Alswang did the settings. Ben Edwards did the costumes.

It is in three acts and a prologue. The prologue takes place in a "small apartment in Greenwich Village." But the play that follows, in three acts and four scenes, takes place in Pinneyfield, which could be anywhere from New Jersey to New England.

Apart from Miss Griffies, Mr. Helmore and Miss Hunt, who are, so to speak, starred, Edmon Ryan, Philip Coolidge, Judith Parrish and Joseph Sweeney are featured. But nothing comes of it. Each time you think they will score. Each time you are disappointed.

So, when the final curtain falls, you are left with the wish that things were better. But they are not.

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The story of "Legend of Sarah" is not surprising in its freshness. There is nothing new in the narrative of the good woman who is really bad. Even if she did live in the America of 1776 and is found out in the America of today.

Was Sarah Pinney, she of the legend, a bad girl? Or was she a good one? Anyway, she did lock herself in her bed-chamber with General Howe for several days, having a nice time and gaining a reputation for being a patriot as she did so.

She writes it down in black and white. But, as everyone is determined to present her in the best light, her descendants, hide her diary from generation to generation. By the time the twentieth century comes, Sarah is a lady.

This, after the opening scene in Greenwich Village, is told and retold in Pinneyfield, whether in New Jersey or New England. It is told to Clemantine Pinney, for the most part. But even she grows tired occasionally and goes upstairs to rest.

You do not rest, however. You remain and listen, not only to Tom Helmore and Marsha Hunt, but to Miss Parrish, Mr. Coolidge, Mr. Ryan and Mr. Sweeney.

• • •

There is no reason why an Englishman should be good at staging this sort of American thing. Even if this sort of American thing were good and Benn Levy were good at staging it. But it is not good and Mr. Levy does not make it any better.

Ethel Griffies and Tom Helmore are superior to the others. Miss Griffies was the show-stopper in "Miss Liberty," following what she calls her "retirement" in 1947. Mr. Helmore was in "Clutterbuck," although he had not met the author-director.

Marsha Hunt is no great shakes as the youngest descendant of the Sarah of the legend. She says the words. She goes through the motions. And nothing happens to make you take her seriously. To me, Miss Hunt is an actress who does not register.

In "Legend of Sarah," this is also true of some of the others, of Edmon Ryan, Philip Coolidge, Judith Parrish and Joseph Sweeney. But Miss Hunt is the chief offender. For she is starred, you might say, along with Miss Griffies and Mr. Helmore.

Kermit Bloomgarden does better when his authors are serious. And an American is directing his American script, even if it is not worth while, "Legend of Sarah" is not.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

October 12, 1950

By HOWARD BARNES

Back-Sliding Can Be Fun

JAMES Gow and Arnaud d'Usseau have foresaken social significance for slapstick in their new play, "Legend of Sarah." There is nothing more controversial or provocative in the new Fulton Theater offering than the moral lapses of a Revolutionary War heroine and the latter-day backslidings of her descendant. Like "Deep Are the Roots" the play is marked by literate craftsmanship, although much of the humorous fantasy is labored. It is extremely lucky in having an artful company, which makes much of little in a paper-thin farce. Ethel Griffies gives a redoubtable account of herself as a supposedly prim dowager, while Marsha Hunt, Tom Helmore, Philip Coolidge and Joseph Sweeney contribute timely injections of make-believe to highly contrived drama.

* * *

Starting with a prologue which displays Miss Hunt in scanties, the authors have examined an effort to restore the 18th century grandeur of a town called Pinneyfield, renowned for the fact that a hatchet-faced Mrs. Pinney kept General Howe there for four days when he might have been destroying Washington's army. A secret diary attests to the fact that her heroism was scarcely painful and inspires her great-great-great-great-granddaughter to block a nefarious real estate scheme. For much of the time Gow and d'Usseau have tussled antically with their theme, but the tussle is too apparent. It has taken some tricky staging by Benn W. Levy to pull off succeeding scenes with some degree of gaity.

* * *

"Legend of Sarah" is at its best when it settles for characaterizations, irrespective of the script complications. Clementine Pinney is a rare figure, in both the writing and Miss Griffes's irresistible portrayal. Her attempts to bring her daughter back to her former lover depend on considerable hocus-pocus, but the actress never falters in bringing the figure to fascinating and amusing life. She dominates the action from beginning to end, whether she is delivering a sensational diary to a biographer, or making a wry commentary on manners and morals. Sweeney has so brief a scene that he is barely on stage before he is off, but he, too, captures the essence of the piece.

* * *

Less successful are Miss Hunt and Helmore as the quarreling lovers who are reconciled by a somewhat ghostly missive. The former does her best to make the youngest of the Pinneys impetuous and sympathetic, but the production makes her change her mind too frequently. Helmore is dashing, but strangely irresolute as the writer who upsets an applecart. As for Coolidge, he obviously relishes the role of a foundation executive, making him as stuffily sinister as one could wish. Ralph Alswang's settings are handsomely in period. "Legend of Sarah" has a considerable fund of laughter. It needs a lot of acting to sustain it.

The New York Times

October 12, 1950

'Legend of Sarah,' by James Gow and Arnaud d'Usseau, Satirizes Worship of the Past

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Since the audience that saw "Legend of Sarah" at the Fulton last evening laughed uproariously most of the time, the following remarks should be read with more skepticism than usual. James Gow and Arnaud d'Usseau, who wrote "Deep Are the Roots" and "Tomorrow the World," have now turned their hand to comedy, and a cast of good actors is helping them generously.

"Legend of Sarah" is a jocose yarn about an egotistical writer who is in love with the direct descendant of Sarah Pinney, a Revolutionary heroine. An austere philanthropist, head of a patriotic foundation, is on the point of perpetuating Sarah's memory by buying the town in which she lived and restoring it as a tourists' shrine.

* * *

The egotistical writer wins the love of the contemporary Pinney by presenting documentary proof that old Sarah was nothing more than a slut. Very likely the authors intend this phase of their comedy as an iconoclastic satire on veneration of the past. Last night's audience seemed at least to regard it as pretty funny theatre fare.

But your hired representative, always hopefully in search of the truth, could not help regarding "Legend of Sarah" as a practical joke by a couple of serious writers who cannot approach humor lightly. They plot it and chart it the way writers of popular comedy used to do with some success a quarter of a century ago.

* * *

By referring to the cast above, you can see that the actors are talented. Ethel Griffies plays the part of a sharp-tongued beldame of the old school. Although she could steal every scene in the comedy if she wanted to, she does everyone else the service of playing the character honestly with flavor and precision like the admirable trouper that she is.

Tom Helmore acts the egotistical writer with effortlessness and sardonic humor. As the direct descendant, Marsha Hunt is a little self-conscious and mannered, but you can hardly deny that she's beautiful—always a merciful accomplishment in a lady. Philip Coolidge gives another one of his precisely inflected performances as an insufferable prig.

There is one moment in the second act when "Legend of Sarah" comes violently to life. Acting the part of an independently minded local character who despises polite humbug, Joseph Sweeney angrily bursts in and tells off his betters bitterly. This is an excellent scene, not only because Mr. Sweeney is an able actor who always leaves his mark on a play, but because he says the things the authors really believe in.

Most of the rest of "Legend of Sarah," including Benn W. Levy's frenetic direction, is a struggle for humor that is not implicit in the theme, and is probably not in the hearts of the authors. It is a studied imitation of humor; it is not the genuine article. Or so, at least, it seems to one member of the audience who could not join in with the laughter that filled the theatre most of the evening.

Daily Mirror

October 12, 1950

'Legend of Sarah' Fails In Attempt at Satire

By ROBERT COLEMAN

James Gow and Arnaud D'Usseau, who clicked with two dramas, "Tomorrow the World" and "Deep Are the Roots," have finally turned their hand to comedy. "Legend of Sarah," which arrived at the Fulton Theatre last evening, can only make their admirers regret they tried the new medium. Where they were successful in a serious mood, they fail with what must have been intended to be a satiric antic.

"Legend of Sarah" has to do with a modern girl, right out of "Yes, My Darling Daughter," who has an affair with and supports a biographer of the debunking school. After one of their many spats, she leaves him and interests a wealthy foundation in the restoration of her home town in memory of a distinguished ancestress.

Sarah Pinney had always been considered a Revolutionary heroine, one whose courage had defied even General Howe. But when a representative of the foundation and a local boy with an eye to an easy dollar begin to use unfair means to acquire the necessary property for the restoration, the girl's mother reveals that Sarah had really helped the Revolution via a four-day romp with the General.

The girl's former flame, now the author of a best-seller, pops up in time to make use of the evidence. But even this isn't enough to bring her to her senses. She has to witness the crushing of an independent neighbor before awakening to the fact she is helping perpetrate a fraud. Needless to say, the curtain rings down on a happy ending.

Producer Kermit Bloomgarden has given the comedy the benefits of a good cast, attractive settings by Ralph Alswang and staging by the eminent director-playwright, Benn W. Levy. But even these assets are not enough to overcome the obvious mechanics of a script reminiscent of Lajos Biro's "The Grandmother" and A. A. Milne's "The Truth About Blayds."

The wonderful Ethel Griffies is the cynical mother, Marsha Hunt the vivacious and headstrong daughter, and Tom Helmore the realistic author. Edmon Ryan, Philip Coolidge, Judith Parrish and Joseph Sweeney, first-rate troupers all, do their best by other roles.

Many of the first-nighters apparently found delights that escaped us in "Legend of Sarah," judging by their hearty laughter and robust applause. Unfortunately, we were able to share their enthusiasm for cliches infrequently during an evening of forced humor.

"The Gioconda Smile"

New York Post
HOME NEWS

October 9, 1950

Case of the Vengeful Spinster

By Richard Watts Jr.

Aldous Huxley has, as you must have heard, made a play out of his famous short story about a homicide, "The Gioconda Smile," and it was presented by a competent acting company at the Lyceum Saturday night. As an addict of both the theatre and Mr. Huxley, I wish I could say that this promising alliance of talents had worked out happily, but that, unfortunately, isn't the way it happened. The dramatization has some effective scenes and Valerie Taylor, as a psychopathic spinster, can scare you upon occasion, but, on the whole, "The Gioconda Smile" gets lost somewhere between murder and metaphysics.

Indeed, the most interesting thing about the play is, not its merit as a theatre piece, but the light it throws on the development, or, at least, the change in Mr. Huxley as writer and thinker. When he did "The Gioconda Smile" as a short story in the early twenties, it was a blandly ironic and quite chilling little tale about a British bounder, who is framed by a jealous old maid for a murder she had committed, but richly deserved his unpleasant fate. His doom seemed a kind of horrible cosmic practical joke, and it was fascinating to behold. Those, however, were the days when Mr. Huxley was just a bright young cynic.

Change of View

Since then, the celebrated author has changed his early cynicism for a decidedly mystic and metaphysical bent, and "The Gioconda Smile" has changed with him. No longer is it the savagely sardonic jest it used to be. Now it has become a story of regeneration, in accordance with the tenets of the author's new personal faith. The victim of the spinister's vengeance still starts out as a rather unpleasant fellow until he is visited in his cell by a wise old doctor, who is Mr. Huxley's spokesman, and learns that sin is "resisting the spirit of God within me." It seemed to comfort him a great deal.

This change in Mr. Huxley's spirit may be the sign of greater depth and maturity in his philosophical viewpoint, but it doesn't help his play. Instead, it interferes noticeably with its dramatic effectiveness. While the sight of the spinster going mad before your eyes can be properly frightening, as Miss Taylor portrays it, the spell is broken as soon as the scene shifts to the prison, and the episodes of soul wrestling between the doctor and the convicted wife-murderer merely seem to interrupt the course of the melodrama. The result is not happy as either a suspense play or a philosophical dissertation.

Secondary Role

One of the oddities of the evening is that Basil Rathbone, the star of the proceedings, is to be seen in the least interesting of the three top roles. As the man falsely blamed for his wife's poisoning, Mr. Rathbone may be nominally the central figure, but actually his part in the narrative is less important and less arresting than the characters of the spinster and the doctor, as enacted by Miss Taylor and George Relph. He has even disappeared from the stage before the climactic scene and the happy ending arrive.

Miss Taylor, a fine actress who hasn't been seen in this country for a long time, has herself an emotional field day as she cracks up under the spell of her own vengeance. It is an effectively hysterical performance. Mr. Relph, the sort of reliable British actor who never appears to do anything wrong, gives an excellent performance as the author's mouthpiece. Mercia Swinburne struck me as perhaps melodramatically excessive as the nurse who first suspects the innocent man of being a murderer, and Marion Russell is satisfactory as the girl for whom he is supposed to have done the killing. I wish I could welcome Mr. Huxley to the theatre more enthusiastically.

"THE GIOCONDA SMILE"

Play by Aldous Huxley; staged by Shepard Traube; settings by Feder; presented by Mr. Traube at the Lyceum Theatre, October 7, 1950. The cast:

Janet Spence....Valerie Taylor
Nurse Braddock.....Mercia Swinburne
Henry Hutton....Basil Rathbone
Clara.....Margaret Warwick
Doris Mead....Marian Russell
Dr. Libbard.....George Relph
Gen. Spence...Charles Francis
Maid.....Emily Lawrence
1st Warder...Charles Gerrard
2nd Warder....Robert Myerson

Synopsis: Act I. Time: The present spring. Scene 1. The living room in the Hutton's country house, England. Scene 2. The same. Midnight the same day. Act II. Scene 1. The same. About two months later. Scene 2. One month later. Act III. Time: Late autumn. Scene 1. Spences' drawing room. Scene 2. Hutton's cell. Scene 3. Spences' drawing room, late at night. Scene 4. Hutton's cell. Scene 5. Spences' drawing room, early morning.

Journal-American

October 9, 1950

Has Huxley Moments But Is Unimportant

By ROBERT GARLAND

No, I don't think so, but—

I wonder why they have long and not very helpful pieces in the Sunday papers—not in the Journal-American, I am glad to say—explaining, as you might say, the why and wonders of the play that is to expose itself during the week that is to follow.

The first piece in the first paper is by the author. He writes, and in considerable detail, how it got the way it is. The second piece in the second paper is an interview with the author. He tells, and in considerable detail, how it got the way it is.

"The Gioconda Smile't is the most immediate example of what I'm talking about. The one which was to open Tuesday and finally got around to opening Saturday at the Lyceum. Aldous Huxley wrote it as a short story more than a quarter century back.

It was rewritten for a motion picture called "A Woman's Vengeance." Now it is a play. The plot is refurbished and Basil Rathbone and Valerie Taylor are the stars. The featured player is George Relph and some of the things they say are startling.

But of importance there is none. None worth writing about, at any rate.

• • •

Words Added

In England, where "The Gioconda Smile" was a play before it was a motion picture, it was part of a book of short stories entitled "Mortal Coils." Now, after 28 years, a great many words have been added. But, I fear, without a great deal of common sensibility.

Doris, I remember, was nothing much to read about when she first made her appearance. In fact, I think she never did make her appearance in the strict meaning of the word. But, at the Lyceum, she is the equal of Mr. Rathbone, Miss Taylor and Mr. Relph put together.

Henry Hutton is first shown as an English country gentleman with a sick wife on his hands. Then Janet Spence is added. She is a visiting neighbor. Then Miss Mead comes on the scene, adding to the complications. Her background is never very clear.

As soon as Mrs. Hutton dies, the duel—and it is a duel—is on between Miss Spence and the charming little lady whose background is obscure. They talk a lot. Some of what they have to say is, as I have said, provocative. But important, no . . .

Not at long last in 1950. Not when bombs are just about to fall!

• • •

Huxley Moments

But even if "The Gioconda Smile" came to us more modestly, less unheralded, than it does, it would I daresay, seem over-presented. It just isn't as important, as worthful, as highfalutin as it says it is. Or as its author directly and indirectly points out.

It has its Aldous Huxley moments. But, as 1922 moved into 1950, as a small short story moved into a big long play, as, to us, a narrative that didn't lend its name to a book in which it appeared became a major work of theatre art, something went astray.

Now "The Gioconda Smile"—a vehicle for, to name them as they came, Basil Rathbone, Valerie Taylor, George Relph and Marian Russell—is not as overpowering as it sounds. Or seems. Or, as a matter-of-fact, is. But it has its moments, most of them of 28 years ago.

Best in the cast is Mr. Relph. He is the doctor. Next is Mr. Rathbone. He is a great favorite. Next is Miss Russell. She is easy on the eye. And Miss Taylor. There is so-so staging by Shepard Traube, the producer. And Sunday before explanations by Mr. Huxley, the author . . .

Why must a play explain itself beforehand? And what its author means?

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

October 9, 1950

'Gioconda' Keeps 'Em Breathless

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Type—Full blown drama.
Theme—Destructive vanity.
Pace—Slow into slam bang.
Cast—Really delivers.
Virtue—Credibility and suspense.
I think—Tremendous impact.

When a play of suspense, which you already know as a short story and a movie, can keep you breathless on the edge of your seat through its third act, it's got to be good. "The Gioconda Smile" is.

The Actors Act.

Speaking fron the fullest prejudice, this is a kind of play I deeply enjoy. It has a melodramatic basis, but its characters are intelligently complex and its conversation is most literate. It carries a philosophical idea that is valid and clear. When the script gets exciting, the actors cut loose and ACT.

The pattern here is murder. It is successful, then later it is detected, through believable circumstance. The wrong person is convicted and the third act shows the struggle of wills by which true guilt is allocated.

This may sound bald and sensational. The latter, it is. There is a mechanical trick with a clock, toward the end, that seems obvious but is utterly absorbing. The final confession comes within about 90 seconds of the final curtain.

Smartly Deceitful.

The play demands a certain amount of early indulgence because it is smartly deceitful. In the beginning the talk is plentiful and polite, but indicates unpleasant rather than happy people.

As circumstances surround them with tragedy, you realize that the people are tragic in themselves. One finds salvation in terror, and another is destroyed in combat with frustration.

What lifts this play well out of the thriller class, is that the events develop and illuminate the characters, but the people are never made into accommodations of the plot. They have a life of their own and this brings the performance a lot of subtle tension.

Basil Rathbone Stars.

Basil Rathbone plays a dilettante married to a rich invalid. Intellectual vanity makes him contemptuous of his own sensuality. He would like to think of himself as above temptation.

In the death house, about to be unjustly hanged for his wife's murder, he is made to see that he can will his own destiny, and gain peace by 'concurring with the God inside him' instead of resisting It.

It is a role covering a great deal of emotional ground, and Mr. Rathbone negotiates it unfalteringly. It is a memorably wise and tempered performance.

Valerie Taylor Remarkable.

Valerie Taylor's depiction of the woman who loves him is truly remarkable. This a creature first frustrated then passionately liberated, then violently shocked. In the end she goes completely to pieces, mentally and physically.

Miss Taylor at first gives the role a texture that is often ugly or awkward without seeming the slightest bit abnormal. As balance deserts her, she plays for the fullest florid values, and is not afraid of seeming downright repellent.

Relph Outstanding.

George Relph plays the family doctor who believes in the victim's innocence, and extricates the final confession. He wisely refrains from mannerisms, and it is his casual simplicity that makes the play so credible even when it deliberately veers toward the penny dreadful.

The leading character's second wife seemed a silly tart in Aldous Huxley's original story. Here she is a warm attractive youngster played with simple charm by Marian Russell. This switch gives the story dignity and genuinely involves the audience's emotions.

Mercia Swinburne wisely plays down the militantly virginal nurse who is briefly held responsible for the first wife's death.

"The Gioconda Smile" has some most appropriate sets and rarely beautiful lighting by Feder.

DAILY NEWS

October 9, 1950

Valerie Taylor Puts the Thrills In Huxley's 'The Gioconda Smile'

By JOHN CHAPMAN

The ladies from England continue to be of splendid help to the new stage season—and to their respective plays. First there came Dame Edith Evans in "Daphne Laureola," with her celebrated brandy binge. Next there was Flora Robson, whose acting has been the mainstay of "Black Chiffon"—which, by the way, has shut down for a fortnight to allow its star time for a minor operation. And now there is a bravura performance by Valerie Taylor in "The Gioconda Smile."

Shepard Traube brought this last-named drama to the Lyceum Theatre Saturday evening, and the playing of Miss Taylor, Basil Rathbone and George Relph elicited unforced cheers from the first audience. It is the kind of thriller to which I have been partial — almost lonesomely partial, sometimes: a play of murder and mental stress which does not go bang-bang and zip-zip, but which, rather, takes its time in deliberate enjoyment of its own good points. I fancy that I shall not be too lonesome this time, for "The Gioconda Smile" is the work of a first-class writer, Aldous Huxley, and it builds to an exciting last act in which all three of the principal actors can cut loose. Or I should say all four, for 21-year-old Marian Russell, making her big-time theatre debut, offers a very appealing performance of a bride who is as hapless as any fancier of psychological melodrama could wish.

"Angel Street" Vein.

It is easy to see why Mr. Traube has brought us "The Gioconda Smile," for it was he who presented the memorable "Angel Street," in which Judith Evelyn gained fame as the unnerved pivotal character. The two plays are alike in the tension which grows while justice plugs along in its determined English fashion. And, like its superior predecessor, "The Gioconda Smile" is not a whodunit. There is no tricky concealment of fact or circumstance from the audience. The suspense comes from waiting for justice to come to the proper conclusion—and hoping that it will arrive there in time.

It should by now be common knowledge that Mr. Huxley first wrote his piece of fiction as a short story in 1922, then wrote it as a movie for Zoltan Korda in 1941, and finally developed it as a play which had a success in London last Spring. His title refers to the inscrutable twist on the face of Da Vinci's Mona Lisa—and his modern puzzle is Miss Taylor, who is much in love with Mr. Rathbone, a man of wealth but a married one.

Mr. Rathbone's wife, long an invalid, dies, and in about six weeks he marries young Miss Russell. It soon is apparent that he should have allowed for a longer and decenter period of mourning, for suspicion arises as to the manner of his wife's passing. Exhumation and an autopsy show it was murder by arsenic, and the lean and handsome Basil—who can look rather fiendish—is convicted and sentenced to hang. And, although the play is not a whodunit, this is all one should tell about it.

Horrifying Neurotic.

Miss Taylor, whom we first saw as the cold-blooded sister in "Berkeley Square," returns to us in a fine, fat part and she makes the most of it. Her neuroticism mounts horrifyingly as the hour for the hanging nears. Mr. Rathbone, too, has his scene in an interlude of frightened hysteria in a condemned man's cell. This overwrought interlude does not seem to be exactly a part of the play, but it does give Mr. Relph, in the role of a friendly physician, an opportunity to perform quietly, sanely and tellingly as he counsels Mr. Rathbone to face the fact that there is no future. His easy authority was last noted locally when he was a stalwart of the Old Vic Company in the two sections of "Henry IV" and other dramas.

Mr. Traube is not one to forget good work. He remembers—as who doesn't?—the malignant and effective lighting achieved by Abe Feder in "Angel Street." Mr. Feder has now become a scenic artist as well as an illuminator, and his three settings—a country house, a prison cell and a London drawing room—do much to key a drama which is never shoddy and becomes increasingly absorbing. Mr. Traube has directed his company with relish.